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## A Highway and A Homestead

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

I was startled as I drove along High St. on my way to flesh-out some facts about Bob and Lydia Hale's old house that I was including in my roster of Duxbury's oldest houses, to see a banner in front of the Methodist Church signifying its 125th anniversary. I had known of course that the Methodists came to Duxbury around 1815, built a church in Ashdod in 1831 and about this time erected one now used by the congregation of St. John, but somehow the 125 years had slipped my mind. So I slipped into the building where I found painters with my friend Richard Wadsworth busy with scaffolding and paint rollers and brushes. I went around to the back of the church where I found a popular day-care center in full operation. Climbing up a tall flight of stairs to a second floor office I met the pastor, Barbara Cann.

I was impressed with this worship center, and phoned the Harris's whose father had owned a large square colonial house and brought up a family closely paralleling the Merry's after his arrival here in 1912. Priscilla Harris was glad to help me write a story of High St. but she was busy painting church pews the next day and could see me only the day after. She was overflowing with reports of the anniversary in progress since the preceding October and this report relies largely on her and the Hales' records. What especially intrigued me was the fact that this church is the only remnant of a flourishing commercial community—in fact a self-sufficient community that reached actually from the Tree of Knowledge to the junction with Rte. 14, i.e. present

a cast iron kitchen sink pump. Customers were treated to a bonus in the shape of a flowered chamber put as Helen Melanson tells us in a *Clipper* article in the issue of Sept. 28, 1961, if their purchases reached a certain figure.

My own clear recollection of High St. was Harry Winslow's blacksmith shop where we took our horses to be shod in the spring and fall. I can still remember the acrid smell of the burning hoof as the steel ring was fitted. I remember too the times I brought old Bess for her new shoes. I saw her kick and throw him clear from Pembroke to Duxbury as Harry used to say since his shop spanned the town line. He had a special device for spirited horses like Bess. It was a canvas sling bolted by ropes and block and tackle to the beams that supported the roof. Passing this sling around Bess and raising her by the block and tackle till her toes barely touched the floor thus depriving her of a solid footing from which to kick, she would have to submit to his craft. It took a full day to bring the horses here and back. In later years, when paved roads wrought havoc with horse's feet, Harry owned a Model-A pick-up which he had fitted out with blacksmith equipment so he would come to the farm, but nothing could take place of the shop with its glowing soft coal forges, its musical anvil, and its tank of water into which the horse's red hot steel shoe was plunged, sending up a cloud of steam completely enshrouding Harry.



The Thomas Loring House. The photo was taken before the back ell burned.

8 feet by 10 which could conceal a person if necessary and probably did in the slavery days. A firewood closet is included back of the big square chimney. The attic stairway discloses another "hiding place" and what fun the children must have had playing "hide and seek" here.

Three of the downstairs fireplaces have mantel pieces and cupboards about them, once used as storage areas for cups and saucers or possibly for hiding "spirits" when the "parson" came for his annual call. The floors have boards 19-23 inches wide, possibly cut from the virgin pine that stood on the property. Lot Phillips had later bought some of this land to furnish lumber for his box factory that stood for many years at the junction of Rte. 14 and 53. Lot Phillips also owned North Hill at the turn of the century and it was from him that my father bought the land for his dairy farm, selling the lumber for the price of the land. The Loring's were in the lumber business so the houses they built were of top level quality. Lumber used in the construction of their houses was known as "Kings Arrow Pine" according to a research paper given to the Hales when they bought the house in 1987, as King George's navy had reserved it for their use.

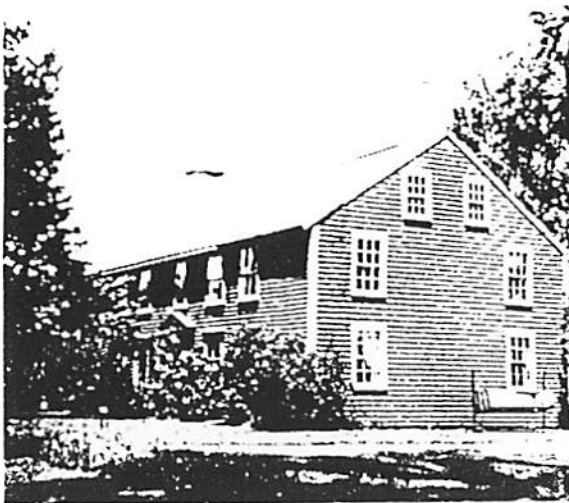
It is important for readers of this essay to know too, that I have tagged this dwelling a "Homestead" which according to my dictionary was "a farmhouse with outlying buildings." This was a complex of buildings most of which have either been destroyed by fire or blown down in a hurricane as the 8-storied barn that stood on the property when the Hales bought it. It is hard for us in our rapid communication society to realize the life style of the times in which this homestead was constructed. The goal was self-sufficiency—both in regards for the animals and shelter as well as independent and relatively comfortable living for people. Buildings as we can still see in southern Maine and New Hampshire were telescoped so one could feed the animals, procure firewood, all indoors so the self-sufficiency of the family extended throughout the homestead. A few lines from Whittier's *Snowbound* describe just how it was:

So all night long the storm roared on  
The morning broke without a sun....

And when the second morning shone  
We looked upon a world unknown

On nothing we could call our own

Washington St. in Pembroke. And I have decided to ignore the line of division that was made when Pembroke separated itself from Duxbury and Marshfield in 1713. The Hale's lent me a flyer published in 1713 acknowledging the separation saying "Provided that they (citizens of the new town) do within the space of 2 years next coming procure and settle an orthodox, learned minister of good conversation; and set forth a good accommodation of lands for the use of the ministry and grant their minister an honourable annual maintenance." With this statement I would like to turn to *A Report on High St.*



One of the old homes on High St.

High St. is the most prestigious street in town. It has been called The Massachusetts Path, the Bay Path (there are 3 streets entering colonial Boston that are called Bay Path) King's Highway and High St. Priscilla and Ed Harris finally found the answer to the question of this name on a recent trip to England noting streets there called "High" were "main" streets. And that is what High St. used to be. It is a shock to some Duxbury folks to make this discovery. But it was farm acreage along this former Indian trail that was allotted in the great land division in the Colony in 1627. So it is High St, not Washington, which was not laid out until 1798 nor St. George St. nor even King Caesar Rd. that also deserves the historic district designation they enjoy.

This highway saw first Indian footprints, then white men on horseback, then the stagecoaches that changed horses here. This street is a single unit, and folks living along it paid little attention to the arbitrary political division made in 1713. In its heyday it boasted a blacksmith shop, a tin shop, Thayer's furniture store where one could buy a spinning wheel, a butter churn or

The street is filled with many houses today, a few of them of colonial vintage. Perhaps the oldest, according to Priscilla, is across the street from the church. Another would be the residence of Dr. Thomas Delano, who married Rebecca Alden, daughter of John and Priscilla, and built his house in 1667 as the date board indicates. Another older house would be that now occupied by the MacFarlanes. It was in the east front parlor of this house where Nancy Glass held forth as postmistress. It was built in 1767. The house now owned by Priscilla and Ed Harris was built in 1793 and bought by Priscilla's father in 1912. He had held a pastorate for the methodists in Connecticut but decided to change his career and go into farming. He had a cranberry bog and tended sheep, pigs, and cattle and putting it all together made an income enough to support his family. Probably the most enterprising of High St. residents was Elisha Delano, grandson of the Delanos who had received the land north of the Alden property on what is now St. George St. as shown on the accompanying sketch.

But to my mind the most remarkable of the Loring houses was the one now owned and occupied by Lydia and Bob Hale. The house is double-dated 1691 and 1702. It stood for many ears as the chief landmark of the King's Highway, serving as a tavern under the name "The Sign of the Woodpecker." It stands on land given in a land grant to Thomas Loring III, one of the family of Loring that came to Hingham and Hull in 1637. The main part of the house is an early "plank house" indigenous to the Plymouth area in that the solid boards run vertically up through the second floor. It is a colonial type with 2 end chimneys, low ceilings and has a downstairs hall that runs straight through the house from the front to the back door. It was so located that it takes full advantage of the sun during the winter. Among the colonial curios in the kitchen and the back upstairs chambers are gunstock beams, many with wooden pegs clearly visible. There is no cellar, not even a root cellar as most houses of this vintage had. As was customary to depict the residence of a patriot the chimneys have always been painted white.

Houses like this one are really story books of the past. Like the manor house through whose wardrobe closet C.S. Lewis' children entered upon Narnia, the winter wonderland in his book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, this house holds historic treasures. First, it has few closets and those it has are shallow. People in these times did not have enough of a wardrobe to merit storage space. Perhaps an outfit for "go to meeting," another for every day use and then perhaps some work clothes. When I was growing up with 8 brothers and sisters I had a blue serge suit (my pride and joy when I first put on the pants at age 12 or so) an outfit I wore to school and some work clothes. And that was ALL.

This house has a back chamber enclosing a low-built closet with a loose board that opened onto an open space

on looking we could call our own  
Around the glistening wonder bent  
The blue walls of the firmament

No cloud above, no earth below  
A universe of sky and snow!

It was to live despite the deep snow that rows of outbuildings were set up. The first outbuilding would be for firewood, the second for chickens, the third for sheep and goats, the tall barn with pigs in the cellar and horses and cows on the ground level with the haymow above.

The bottom line of the living in these days was "working with" nature rather than "conquering" or "exploiting" nature as has been the habit of Western man in recent years. In those early days people waited for high tides to launch their boats, they waited for the snow to melt rather than shoving it aside, they were patient for the growth of crops rather than force fertilizing them. An astronomer friend visiting us a few years ago reminded me of this when I complained that our house was not "oriented." I guess I was used to edifices which always pointed toward the East symbolically awaiting the return of Christ. But he set me straight. Architects of colonial times (our house is dated-boarded 1799) set their residences always so that maximum sunlight would pour on them in the cold winter months. "Your house is so placed that during winter you get sunshine on 3 sides. This was the wisdom of the architects of those days." I must say I hope the exploitation of nature we have witnessed up to the present as so eloquently set forth in the vice president's book entitled *Earth in the Balance* will promptly be brought to an end.

I would like to close this essay with a few lines written in a paper delivered before the Unitarian Church a few years ago by Virginia Seaver.

"High St. has no view of the ocean or lake. Other than Pine Brook that runs parallel to the road on the southerly side and is not in sight, the only body of water that meets the eye is the pond at Camp T, and except for the Harris home there are no outstanding houses on this stretch of road—there are just comfortable well-kept homes. But there is an atmosphere of stability, friendliness, and peace one feels even driving through it. There is some traffic but it is a roadway on which one could jog or just meander up to visit a neighbor..."

And I might add, this is why before it is spoiled by "development" I hope fervently that it can become a Federally marked "Historic District." Duxbury needs to preserve it in its present state for the generations to come.

